

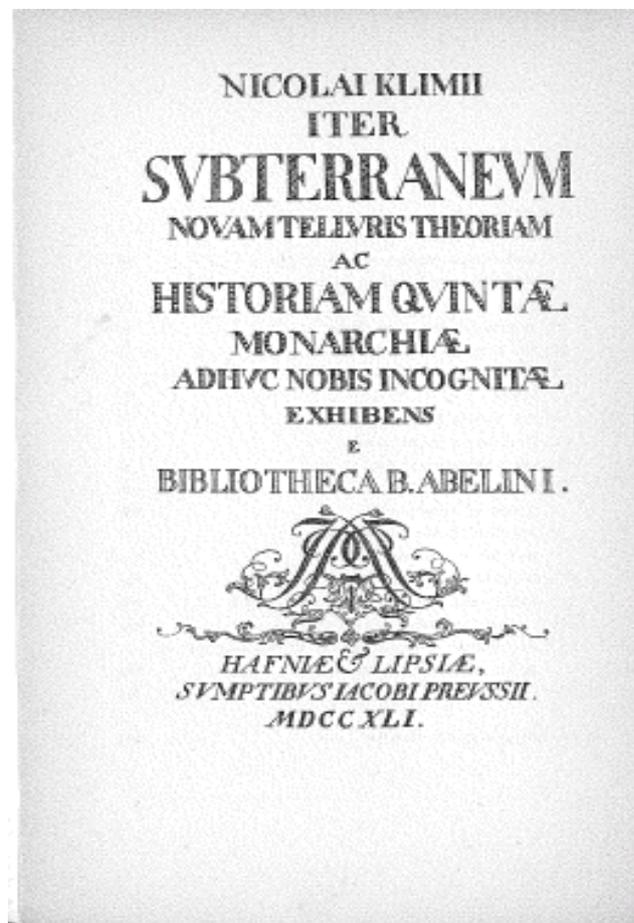
# Modern Thoughts Disguised as Ancient Genres

## - A Discussion on Ludvig Holberg's novel "Niels Klim"

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In 1741, at the age of 57, the Danish author Ludvig Holberg published his first and only novel. In Danish it is known as "*Niels Klim*" which is the name of its major character.

It was published anonymously in Latin and its full title was: "Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum Novam Telluris Theoriam ac Historiam Qvintæ Monarchiæ Adhuc Nobis Incognitæ Exhibens E Bibliotheca B. Abellini"



Frontpage of the first edition of Niels Klim (1741)

[i.e.: "*Niels Klim's travel beneath the surface of the earth; revealing new knowledge about the Earth and the History of the 5th Monarchy, that has so far been unknown to us. Found amongst the posthumous works written in Latin in the Library of the late Abelin*"]

This novel is the subject of the following presentation - and it's in many ways typical of its time. Briefly characterised it is basically an account of a fictitious journey arranged as a picaresque novel with a Utopian vision inserted.

But before I'll go into a discussion of the novel - and show how it distinguishes itself from many of the contemporary novels that might be characterised in the same way - I shall briefly introduce the three well-known genres mentioned in my short presentation of the novel - that throughout the century were used by many other writers as well - mixed in various combinations.

### 1) The Adventure Novel

The adventure novel often has an account of a journey as its centre. Homer's *Ulysses* is one of the earliest examples.

Basically such an account can be either true or false. It may be an account of a real journey or it may be an account of a fictive one. Sometimes authors wrote both true and fictional accounts. In 1719 Daniel Defoe published an account of a journey made by "Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner", and in 1724-1727 Defoe was the author of *A Tour In Circuits Through The Island of Great Britain*. In France Voltaire published his *Letters On the English* (1734) telling about his observations in London during his stay between 1726 - 1728, and in 1759 he wrote *Candide* (1759) where a fictional journey is the major compositional feature.

One of the major advantages in relation to the fictive accounts is that they create a feeling of uncertainty in the reader: Is this or could this be real? The realistic features inherent in the real account render plausibility to the fictional account.

Throughout the 18th century the genre was very popular. Many of the titles contain the words 'travel' or 'journey' or words that imply a similar activity. Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* was published in 1719. Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), Swift's *Gullivers' Travels* (1726), Ludvig Holberg's *Niels Klim's Subterranean Voyage* (1741), Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy by Mr. Yorrick* (1768) the edition of *Baron Münchhausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* edited by Raspe (London, 1785) and the Danish poet Jens Baggesen's *The Labyrinth. Or Journey through Germany, Switzerland and France* in Copenhagen 1792-1793. They are all novels that have a journey as its compositional centre.

## 2) The Utopian Novel

The concept of a distant (in fact: non-) existent place where people live without any problems or conflicts originates from religious imaginations of a Paradise. But later such thoughts are expanded to represent ways of organising societies like in Plato's *The Republic* (around 388 BC.) and Thomas Moore's "Utopia" (1516) and in later religious writings like Tommaso Campanella's "Citta delle Sole" (from 1623)

The Utopian thought is present in a number of 17th century novels such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1627), Cyrano de Bergerac's *L'Autre Monde ou Les Etats et Empires de la Lune* (1657) and Fenelon's *Telemaque* (1699) - and of course the progressive enlighteners of the 18th century were attracted to the idea of being able to construct a society based on logic, tolerance and equality and rights of man. But contrary to most of their predecessors, who placed their Utopian societies in distant times and blurred their geographical positions, Holberg's and Voltaire's Utopian societies are contemporary and placed in more recognisable geographical locations. Voltaire's Utopia, "Eldorado" is hidden somewhere between high mountains in South America, and Holberg's "Potu" is placed on a planet inside our own planet 'Earth'. The recognisability and contemporarity supports the idea: this is real and therefore possible.

## 3) The Picaresque Novel

The term 'picaresque novel' simply refers to an episodic recounting of the adventures of an hero (or anti-hero) on the road. One could argue that Homer's *Ulysses* is one of the first picaresque novels - but the modern picaresque novel is normally said to begin with the Spanish anonymously published text *Lazarillo de Tormes*, published in Antwerp and Spain in 1554, and the most famous picaresque novel of all times is no doubt Cervantes' *Don Quixote* from 1605.

Once again, Voltaire's *Candide* can serve as an outstanding example from the 18th century - but the 18th century produces a great many and fine examples of novels composed according to such a definition: Henry Fielding proved his mastery of the form in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), as well as in *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), but also Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726, amended 1735), with its full title from the first edition (1726) *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships* belongs to the picaresque

novels, as does Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through Italy and France* (1768) - and Holberg's *Niels Klim*.

### *Niels Klim*

In *Niels Klim* a Norwegian student, Niels Klim, falls through a hole in a cave in the mountains outside the Norwegian city called Bergen. He lands in an underworld inhabited by trees and animals organised in countries with very different governments and very different customs, manners, religions and moral behaviour. He lands on a planet called Nazar, in a country called Potu (utopia), and this country is described during the first 100 pages of the book. During the next 100 pages he travels through other countries on the planet Nazar (whose inhabitants are all trees), and through various countries placed on the inner side of the crust of the earth - called 'the firmament' where all the inhabitants are animals of various species.



Anonymous illustration from the first edition of *Niels Klim* in Danish (1745)

As mentioned: Holberg's *Niels Klim* is basically a picaresque novel designed as an account of

a fictive journey with a utopian vision inserted - and like almost all of the above mentioned authors Holberg used and mixed the genres. But he didn't just mix and use them as they were. He combined them in a way that points forward towards the modern novel by supplying two new features: 1) he introduces 'development' and 'chronology' as important features in the picaresque novel and for the characterisation of the novel's main character and 2) he introduces an unreliable narrator. A narrator, who judges other people's behaviour by his own standards that go against the logic and reason that lies within the text itself, which in this way is being contradicted by the narrator's own words. Let's take a look at the narrator in *Niels Klim*

### ***Niels Klim* and the unreliable narrator**

The narrator in *Niels Klim* is its main character, Niels Klim. He is the one who (except for 15 pages where he reads (and reproduces) a diary) tells us the story. But what he tells us is not believable. Well we believe, that he sincerely believes he is right - but the text - the context - tells us he is wrong.

An example: In Potu they have values like equal rights between male and female, tolerance, respect for manual, productive work (especially farming, since farming produces the basic food), dislike for learned people's conceit and contempt for the hollow art of discussion, faith and admiration for the thorough and slow and distrust of hasty and superficial knowledge.

In the imperial archives Niels Klim finds a piece of paper that suggests that the people (i.e. the trees) who do the most useful and productive things for the common good are the ones to be honoured the most - and those who receive honour for unproductive work must be considered lowest-ranking in society. On page 77 it says

"I [i.e Niels Klim] found out, that the following governing rank and precedence was hidden in the imperial archives:

- 1) Those who have helped the republic with their fortune
- 2) Those who serve the republic without getting paid
- 3) Peasants and farmers with eight branches or more
- 4) Peasants with seven branches or less
- 5) Those who have founded factories or manufactories
- 6) Those who are skilled workmen
- 7) Philosophers and doctors of both sexes
- 8) Artists
- 9) Salesmen

- 10) People who work at the Court with a salary of 500 Rupaters  
 11) People who work at the Court with a salary of 1000 Rupaters”

Accordingly, in Potu the people *valued* the most are those who are occupied in productive work, and those who donate money to the common good. The most *disliked* are court officials and courtiers with a monthly salary of 1,000 pounds, closely followed by artists and philosophers. Niels Klim interprets this correctly. He says that it seems that the more favoured you are, the more humbly and modestly you behave; and he wonders why the richest citizen of Potu greets all others with humility and modesty. “It is his duty. – Since he enjoys the most advantages, he is Potu’s greatest debtor” is the answer (p. 78). Niels Klim finds this utterly ridiculous and unnatural. His judgement is based on his experiences from Europe. The European system of rank is exactly the opposite of the Potuan system. But the reader understands that the Potuan logic is correct: The one who enjoys the most advantages is the one who should be most grateful. But Niels Klim comes from a society, a European society, where he who enjoys a minimum of advantages is expected to be the most grateful.

In spite of his correct interpretation, Niels Klim lets prejudice and bias rule his conclusion. Many other situations reveal that Niels Klim mistakes prejudice and bias for ‘nature’. He is simply not able to decide what is ‘dictated by nature’ and what is transmitted prejudice and ingrown habits, created by man. Throughout the novel, the hierarchy of values in the underground world is exactly the opposite of what was common in 18th century Europe.

But Holberg also uses another technique to make the same point. In Niels’ - and the reader’s - mind there is a picture of the European way of life - and by confronting Niels (and his reader) with another way of life - just as foolish and illogical as the European way of life (because actually it is the European way of life in reverse) the reader - but not Niels Klim - gets the idea. In the kingdom of Kokleku, on the planet Nazar, where all the inhabitants are junipers, Niels discovers that the male junipers “are used only to deal with kitchen-things and other inferior work. In times of war they serve the army but hardly ever as anything but private soldiers. (...) The females on the contrary are entrusted with the most important civil, ecclesiastical and military offices (...). This nation seems to me to be totally unnatural and mad.” (p. 107-108). And Niels is indignant that the male gender has not long ago broken out of these shameful chains. “Old habits must have weakened them (...) they thought that Nature dictated that women should rule and men bake, weave, spin, sweep, clean and furthermore be scolded” (p. 108).

What turns Niels into a comic figure is that he has the right understanding - that there is a natural law that a society should obey in order to be a well-functioning society - but he is not able to decide what's 'nature' and what's habits and prejudice. The thing that Niels reproaches the male inhabitants of Kokleku with - is - theoretically - exactly the same that he himself succumbs to, namely to mistake 'habit' for 'nature'.

The reader is brought to realise that it is wrong to have one of the sexes in a privileged position and the other in a suppressed position, and is (hopefully) convinced, that the Potuan equality should be preferred, but Niels Klim is hopelessly “constantly condemning the constitution of this nation as awkward, deformed, and totally against nature” (p. 110).

In general Niels Klim's judgement is not to be trusted. Holberg gives him away as an unreliable narrator.

Let us now turn to the genre, the picaresque novel.

### ***Niels Klim and the picaresque novel***

In its basic form the picaresque novel may be compared to a pearl necklace. The string passing through all the pearls represents the traveller, and each pearl represents each of the situations or countries the traveller passes through.

The novel's primary interest is in the pearls (the state of the world) and not in the string, the traveller (the state of the individual), and the traveller - the main character - is normally very weakly characterised. His main task is to report to the reader what he sees. He is normally placed in the novel as an excuse to make it possible for the author to describe the content of the pearls, the world that surrounds him - and the succession of the events is of no importance.

When Niels Klim travels around the planet Nazar it is of no importance whether he visits the country 'Mardak' before or after 'Spalank' and 'Qvamboja' before or after 'Kimal' or 'Spalank' before or after 'Maskattia' - and likewise on the firmament. The succession is of no importance, because all the events and situations are used for the same purpose: to illustrate the main theme of the novel.

The figures of the novel act like pawns in these discussions not like independent complex individuals. They seem like stereotyped templates, each representing a certain attitude or way of living and they fill a specific function in the novel. And it is the function or the attitude that is interesting - not the person.

But the novel does not end here. Its last 50 pages are dedicated to the history of the 5th Monarchy in the country of 'Qvama', where the inhabitants are human beings, living in a sort of natural state. They have had no communication at all with other people and must therefore, Niels Klim argues, live a life similar to that of the first people on earth. That Holberg considered this part of the book important can be seen from the original title that included the "History of the 5th Monarchy", and furthermore it was a picture of Niels Klim as 'Emperor' dressed in roman emperor's robe that was used as a frontispiece in the first edition - an edition Holberg himself was able to control.



Niels Klim as Emperor of the 5th Monarchy

Anonymous illustration from the first edition of *Niels Klim* in Danish (1745)

These last 50 pages could not be placed anywhere else within the novel. Niels Klim has to end his adventures here in Qvama - and even inside the Qvama-section the succession of

events is not random. The order of events is determined because in Qvama there is a story to be told, a plot that has to be played, and not only a theme that has to be illustrated. The story that is told about Niels Klim in Qvama is the story of a shipwrecked sailor who rises to power and wealth by being elected emperor of the 5th monarchy and finally falls. The rise and fall of the Klimiian empire.

On the last 50 pages Holberg provides his main character with the power and the means to create a utopian society - an ideal society - based on equal rights, tolerance, rights of man, etc. etc. In Qvama Niels Klim is given the opportunity to use all his experience from his stay in Potu and on Nazar, but Holberg refrains from letting him do so and lets him fall back to normal European (foolish) behaviour.

When he arrives at Qvama, the inhabitants take him for a heavenly sent teacher, and he says to himself: "I had the finest opportunity to use my talents, as this country abundantly produces all things necessary for man's use and pleasure" (p. 198). But at the same time he remembers the old saying 'In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king' and shortly after he argues that "it is better to nourish the inhabitants' false understanding of my heritage, as I found it much better for the successful execution of my plan if they took me for a special minister from the Sun rather than an ordinary European citizen" (p. 224). These plans are yet not quite outspoken, but Niels Klim thinks about how easy it would be to obtain the highest positions with just ordinary skills. And when Niels has been in charge of the creation of a Qvamittic army and the first battle is to be fought, Niels thinks that it would be better to let the Emperor lead the army and thus take credit for the victory, because "from such seeming modesty I lost none of my reputation, as the army well knew who its true general was" (p. 208).

Here we are far from the naïve traveller we met on the first 200 pages. This is a calculating, designing and cold-minded Niels. It is the word "seeming" that gives him away, and he profits from this false modesty. In a later battle the emperor falls and the soldiers immediately proclaim him the successor. At first he declines, but he is not at all difficult to persuade, and becomes emperor - and from this point all he can think about is how to "secure my power" and "to expand my Empire and make the whole underworld fear us" (p.231) and conquer other nations. He bribes some of his judges to sentence the real heir to the throne to death and have him secretly executed in order not to let it be the cause of a rebellion. In other words: he is the well-drawn picture of a European imperialist. But with an emperor like that a revolution

is inevitable, and when it comes Niels escapes into the mountains, hides in a cave and once again falls through a hole in the crust of the earth and once more lands outside Bergen in Norway.

This is the story that has to be told about Niels Klim. And it is clear that the sequence of events in Qvama has to be chronological. Some things have to take place before other things in order to let the story - and its main character - evolve so badly. Thus the Qvama-part of the novel differs conclusively not only from the rest of the novel but also from most of the contemporary novels. On the last 50 pages of the novel, the interest lies with the string rather than with the pearls of the necklace.

### ***Niels Klim's afterlife***

In his memoirs Ludvig Holberg has some comments on his own novel. He writes:

The story [i.e.: the plot] in itself is of no importance, as it is only like an envelope containing moral wisdom and moral considerations.

(*Ludvig Holbergs Memoirer*, v. F.J.Billeskov Jansen, Kbh. 1963, s. 164)

These words, I'm sure, have misled interpreters to ignore the plot and concentrate on the moral (enlightened) wisdom, offered to the reader by the novel. I'll give you two examples.

In his dissertation from 1878 the Danish literary historian Julius Paludan writes:

The major error of the book is that it falls apart in numerous single satirical parts, held together by a frame, but without a common, general plan.

(Julius Paludan: *Niels Klim*, Kbh. 1878, s. 175)

And in 1947 one of Denmark's most renowned Holberg researchers F.J. Billeskov Jansen characterises *Niels Klim* as follows:

The book contains an explosion of ideas, but is without one basic idea. It is a major weakness of this Thought Novel that its swarm of ideas are not held together by one fundamental Idea.

F.J.Billeskov Jansen, *Danmarks Digtekunst* bd. 2 Kbh. 1947, s.151]

But as I hope to have demonstrated, these are false accusations. The novel does not lack 'coherence' - it is not without "a common, general plan" and it does not lack "one

fundamental idea”.

By introducing development and evolution (by way of a chronological necessity) in the picaresque novel and in the characterisation of its main character, and thus creating a new dynamic structure, and by introducing the unreliable narrator, *Niels Klim* becomes a pioneering work in the history of the novel in the 18th Century.

Or at the very least: a pioneering work in the history of the Danish 18th-century novel.

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**NOTE**

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All quotations from *Niels Klim* - as well as from the secondary literature - have been translated by the author.